

ALL MY RELATIONS

Mitakuye Oyasin

A Deep Dive into Native American Beliefs, Traditions, and Wisdom

There is no word for 'religion' in most Native American languages. This is not an absence. It is a recognition that all of life is sacred — that spirituality is not a compartment of existence but its entire fabric. This document is an exploration of that recognition across the many nations, traditions, and living wisdom systems of the Indigenous peoples of North America.

A Note on Respect and Attribution Native American spiritual traditions are living, active, and belong to their specific nations. This document is compiled for personal study and spiritual enrichment — not for extraction, appropriation, or ceremonial use by those outside these traditions. Where ceremonies are described, they are described for understanding, not replication. The appropriate way to engage with living Indigenous wisdom is through relationship with Indigenous people, through purchasing books and media created by Indigenous authors, and through supporting Indigenous-led organizations. The traditions described here are not generic 'Native American' beliefs — each belongs to a specific nation with its own language, territory, and cultural context.

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"The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."

— Black Elk, Oglala Lakota holy man, *Black Elk Speaks*

"It was good for the skin to touch the earth, and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing."

— Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota Chief

"The Great Spirit made the flowers, the streams, the pines, the cedars — takes care of them. He takes care of me, waters me, feeds me, makes me live with plants and animals as one of them. All of nature is in us, all of us is in nature."

— Ojibwe elder, recorded by American Academy of Arts and Sciences

Contents

The Landscape of Indigenous North America

- How Many Nations, How Many Traditions?
- The Danger of Generalization
- What Threads Are Shared Across Nations

The Great Spirit and the Animist Worldview

- Wakan Tanka — The Great Mystery (Lakota)
- Gitche Manitou — The Great Manitou (Algonquian)
- The Creator Across Nations
- Animism — Everything Is Alive
- All My Relations — Mitakuye Oyasin

Creation Stories Across Nations

- Earth Diver Stories — The World from Water
- Emergence Stories — From Below to Above
- Sky Woman — The Iroquois Creation
- The Cherokee and the Water Beetle
- The Navajo and the Holy People
- The Lakota and Inyan — Stone and Blood
- Trickster and Creator — Coyote, Raven, and Nanabozho

The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions

- What the Medicine Wheel Is
- The Four Directions in Detail
- East — Dawn, New Beginnings, Eagle
- South — Growth, Trust, Mouse
- West — Introspection, Bear, Water
- North — Wisdom, Buffalo, Earth
- The Center — The Fifth Direction
- The Four Dimensions of the Human Being
- The Bighorn Medicine Wheel

Major Nations and Their Specific Beliefs

- The Lakota (Sioux) — Wakan Tanka and the Sacred Hoop
- The Navajo (Diné) — Hózhó: Walking in Beauty
- The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) — The Great Law of Peace
- The Cherokee — Three Worlds and the Sacred Fire

The Hopi — Emergence, Kachinas, and Prophecy
The Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) — Clan Systems and the Seven Grandfather Teachings
The Inuit — Spirits, Shamans, and the Northern Lights
The Coast Salish and Pacific Northwest — Totem Poles and Potlatch

White Buffalo Calf Woman and the Seven Sacred Rites

The Story of White Buffalo Calf Woman
The Gift of the Sacred Pipe
The Seven Sacred Rites of the Lakota
Inipi — The Sweat Lodge
Hanbleciya — Crying for a Vision
Wiwanke Wachipi — The Sun Dance
Wanagi Wicagluha — Keeping of the Soul
Hunkapi — Making of Relatives
Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan — Coming of Age
Tapa Wankaye Yap — Throwing of the Ball

The Vision Quest

What It Is and What It Is Not
The Preparation
The Quest Itself
Interpretation and Return
The Vision Quest in Modern Life

Shamanism and the Medicine Person

What a Shaman Actually Is
The Calling — Illness as Initiation
Tools of the Medicine Person
The Medicine Bundle
Healing in Native American Tradition
Plant Medicine and Sacred Herbs

Sacred Animals — Totem, Power, and Clan

Animal Spirits as Teachers
The Buffalo — The Great Provider
The Eagle — Messenger to the Creator
The Bear — Healer and Protector
The Wolf — Teacher and Community
The Turtle — The Earth Carrier
The Raven and the Coyote — Trickster Teachers
The White Buffalo — The Miracle Sign

The Afterlife Across Nations

- The Spirit World and Its Many Forms
- The Milky Way as the Spirit Path
- The Aurora Borealis — Ancestors Dancing
- Keeping the Soul — The Lakota Way of Grief
- Reincarnation in Native American Belief
- The Ghost Dance — A Prayer for Renewal

The Land, Reciprocity, and Sacred Ecology

- The Earth Is Not Property — It Is Relationship
- Reciprocity as Spiritual Law
- Traditional Ecological Knowledge
- Sacred Sites and the Living Landscape
- Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity

The Living Traditions Today

- Suppression and Survival
- The American Indian Religious Freedom Act
- Language as Ceremony
- The Drum Is Still Beating
- Recommended Reading by Indigenous Authors

PART ONE: THE LANDSCAPE OF INDIGENOUS NORTH AMERICA

How Many Nations, How Many Traditions?

When we speak of 'Native American beliefs,' we are already doing something that requires an immediate caution. There is no single Native American tradition any more than there is a single 'European religion.' At the time of European contact, there were approximately 500 distinct Indigenous nations in North America, speaking over 300 separate languages in language families as different from each other as English is from Chinese. There are approximately 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States today, and hundreds more in Canada. Each has its own creation stories, its own ceremonies, its own relationship to the land, its own cosmology.

This diversity is the first thing to honor. The Lakota of the Great Plains and the Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest and the Hopi of the Arizona desert and the Haudenosaunee of the Great Lakes — these are not variations on a single theme. They are distinct civilizations with distinct philosophies, as different from each other as they are from the cultures of Europe or Asia.

What this document does is identify the deep structural similarities that run across many — not all — of these traditions, while also exploring the specific beliefs of several individual nations in depth. The similarities are real and meaningful. They emerge from shared relationships with the natural world, from thousands of years of life on this continent, and from ways of understanding reality that differ fundamentally from the Western European tradition that has dominated global discourse for the past five centuries.

What Threads Are Shared Across Nations

Despite enormous diversity, certain recognitions appear consistently across many Indigenous North American traditions:

- The Earth is alive, conscious, and a relative — not a resource
- All things have spirit — animals, plants, stones, rivers, wind
- Humans are not the center of creation but one part of an interconnected web
- Time is cyclical, not linear — history spirals rather than progresses in a straight line
- The invisible world of spirit is as real and as present as the visible world
- Ceremony and relationship are the technologies for maintaining balance

- Knowledge is relational — you learn by being in relationship, not by abstracting from it
- The ancestors remain present and relevant to the living
- Reciprocity is the fundamental law — every taking requires giving back
- The number four is sacred across many nations — four directions, four seasons, four stages of life

PART TWO: THE GREAT SPIRIT AND THE ANIMIST WORLDVIEW

The Great Spirit — Many Names, One Recognition

The concept that appears most consistently across Indigenous North American traditions is what English speakers call the Great Spirit — a supreme creative force or Great Mystery that is the source of all life and the animating intelligence within all things. This is not an old man in the sky issuing commandments. It is something far more similar to the Tao, to Brahman, to the Hermetic 'All' — an all-pervading, all-sustaining intelligence that is both immanent and transcendent, both the ground of all being and the living presence within each specific thing.

Wakan Tanka — The Great Mystery (Lakota/Sioux)

For the Lakota people, the supreme divine principle is Wakan Tanka — usually translated as Great Spirit or Great Mystery, though Wakan means 'sacred, holy, mysterious, incomprehensible' and Tanka means 'great, large, extensive.' A more precise translation might be 'the Great Incomprehensible.'

"At the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, and that center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."

— Black Elk, Oglala Lakota

Wakan Tanka is not a being separate from creation — it is the sacred quality that permeates all creation. Everything that exists is wakan — sacred, mysterious, filled with divine power. The rock is wakan. The river is wakan. The thunderstorm is wakan. Every person, every animal, every plant carries within it a portion of the divine mystery that is Wakan Tanka.

This is not pantheism in the abstract philosophical sense — it is an immediate, practical, lived recognition. When a Lakota person addresses the rocks in a sweat lodge, they are not speaking metaphorically. The rocks are living beings with their own wisdom, their own history — the grandmothers and grandfathers are what they are sometimes called, because they are older than any living creature and carry the memory of the earth's formation within their mineral bodies.

Gitche Manitou — The Great Manitou (Algonquian)

Among the Algonquian-speaking peoples — the Ojibwe, Cree, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Abenaki, and many others — the equivalent concept is Manitou (also spelled Manito or Manidoo). Manitou does not simply mean 'spirit' — it describes the mysterious, sacred power that animates all things, the living force that cannot be fully defined or contained in any single form.

Paula Gunn Allen translates it: 'the Great Mystery, which is unending process, action rather than object, is gi'tchee (Gitche): Great or Huge Mysteriousness-interacting-always.' Notice the emphasis on process — Manitou is not a being but a becoming, not a noun but a verb. The divine is not static. It is always moving, always interacting, always in relationship.

Every stone, every tree, every animal, every human carries its own manitou — its own specific portion of sacred power and personality. The world is therefore not populated by objects but by subjects, each with its own interiority, its own relationship to the whole. This is the most radical and the most practical implication of the animist worldview: there is no such thing as an inanimate thing. Everything is alive. Everything has something to say.

Animism — Everything Is Alive

The word animism — from the Latin *anima* (soul, breath, spirit) — was coined by 19th-century anthropologist Edward Tylor in 1871 to describe what he considered the most 'primitive' form of religion: the belief that natural objects and phenomena possess souls or spirits. He meant it dismissively. Modern scholarship has reclaimed it as a description of one of the most sophisticated philosophical understandings of the nature of reality ever developed.

Contemporary scholars like Graham Harvey (*Animism: Respecting the Living World*, 2006) define animism not as the projection of human qualities onto objects but as the recognition that the world is populated by persons — some of whom are human, most of whom are not — and that life is lived in relationship with those persons. The rock is a person. The river is a person. The storm is a person. This does not mean they are human. It means they have their own existence, their own intelligence, their own ways of being in the world, and that humans are in relationship with them whether they acknowledge it or not.

The Science Underneath Modern physics supports the animist recognition in an unexpected way. At the quantum level, there is no clear boundary between observer and observed — consciousness participates in determining what becomes real. At the biological level, recent research has documented that plants communicate chemically through root networks (the 'wood wide web'), that trees share nutrients with their offspring through fungal networks, and that forests operate as collective intelligent systems rather than collections of separate organisms. At the geological level, the Earth's regulatory systems (climate, atmosphere, ocean chemistry) operate with a homeostatic complexity that Gaia theorists like James Lovelock have described as characteristic of living systems. The animist recognition that everything is alive is being vindicated by the science that most confidently dismissed it.

Mitakuye Oyasin — All My Relations

The single most important phrase in understanding the shared philosophy underlying many Indigenous North American traditions is the Lakota Mitakuye Oyasin — 'All My Relations' or 'We Are All Related.'

Mitakuye Oyasin

Lakota | 'All My Relations' / 'We Are All Related'

These three words are not merely a greeting or a ritual phrase. They are a complete philosophical statement about the nature of reality and the human being's place within it. They declare that every human being is related — genuinely, actually related — to every other human being, to every animal, to every plant, to every stone, to the wind, to the water, to the sky. Not metaphorically related. Not spiritually adjacent. Actually, essentially, materially related.

This is the recognition that modern ecology confirms: the oxygen in your lungs was exhaled by a tree. The calcium in your bones was once a seabed. The iron in your blood was forged in the explosion of a star. You are made of the same matter as everything else in this universe because everything in this universe came from the same source. Mitakuye Oyasin is not poetry. It is physics.

"The Lakota Sioux have a saying: Mitakuye Oyasin — All My Relations — which reflects the interconnectedness of all life forms, including animals, plants, water, and even the wind."

— Lakota tradition

When a Lakota person speaks Mitakuye Oyasin at the beginning or end of a prayer, they are not performing a social ritual. They are making a declaration of kinship with the totality of existence — and accepting the responsibility that kinship entails. You do not exploit your relatives. You do not waste your relatives. You do not treat your relatives as resources. You live with them in relationship, in reciprocity, in the ongoing practice of maintaining the balance that makes continued life possible for all.

PART THREE: CREATION STORIES ACROSS NATIONS

How the World Began — Multiple Visions

Native American creation stories are not naive precursors to scientific understanding. They are sophisticated philosophical and cosmological narratives that encode specific understandings of reality, of the human being's place in the cosmos, of moral responsibility, and of the ongoing relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. They should be read with the same attention and respect we bring to the Genesis narrative, the Egyptian creation myths, or the Vedic hymns — as the encoded wisdom of civilizations that thought deeply about the fundamental questions of existence.

Three major types of creation narrative appear across Indigenous North America:

- Earth Diver stories: A being dives into primordial waters to bring up earth from the bottom, from which the world is formed
- Emergence stories: People or beings emerge upward from previous worlds below the earth to arrive in the present world
- Creation from thought or word: A Creator Being thinks or speaks the world into existence

Earth Diver Stories — The World Rises from Water

Earth Diver creation stories appear across an enormous geographic range — from the Iroquois of the Northeast to the Ojibwe of the Great Lakes to the Blackfoot of the Northern Plains to nations of the Pacific Northwest. Their shared structure: before the world, there is only water. A being — sometimes a woman, sometimes an animal, sometimes a divine figure — falls or descends into the water. Various animals attempt to dive to the bottom to retrieve earth. Most fail. The most unlikely creature — often the muskrat, the beaver, or in Cherokee tradition a small water beetle — succeeds, bringing back a tiny portion of earth from the depths. This earth is then expanded into the world.

The theological content of Earth Diver stories is subtle and profound. The world emerges from cooperation — multiple beings trying, failing, and one finally succeeding through persistence. The world is not created by fiat from above but drawn up from below through collective effort and the contribution of the most humble. The muskrat and the water beetle are the heroes of creation, not the eagle or the bear. This is a creation theology that honors the smallest and the most persistent.

Sky Woman — The Iroquois Creation

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy — Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and later Tuscarora) tell of Sky Woman: a woman who lived in the Sky World, a realm above the primordial

water. Through different versions: she falls through a hole in the sky caused by an uprooted great tree, or is pushed by a jealous husband, or descends deliberately. As she falls, birds from the water world below see her and fly up to catch her on their wings, lowering her gently to the back of a great sea turtle.

The turtle offers to carry her. The animals take turns diving for earth, most failing. Finally, a small creature — in many versions, the muskrat — surfaces with a tiny bit of earth in its claws, dying from the effort. Sky Woman takes this earth and places it on the turtle's back. It grows — because she dances on it, because she has the creative power within her body. The turtle's back becomes Turtle Island — what is now called North America.

Sky Woman then gives birth to a daughter, who gives birth to twins — one who creates through cooperation and beauty, one who creates through conflict. Their rivalry shapes the detailed features of the world. The Haudenosaunee understanding is that the world contains both creative forces and that neither can be eliminated — the tension between them is what keeps the world interesting and alive.

Turtle Island The name Turtle Island for North America comes directly from the Iroquois Sky Woman story and is used by many Indigenous peoples across the continent. It is not merely poetic — it encodes a specific understanding: the continent is alive, it is a being, it has its own nature and its own relationship to the sky. When Indigenous activists and scholars use the term Turtle Island, they are making a philosophical statement about the nature of the land that the name 'North America' (named after a European cartographer) does not carry.

Emergence Stories — Ascending Through Worlds

The Navajo (Diné), Hopi, Pueblo, and many other Southwestern nations tell emergence stories: before the present world, there were previous worlds below this one. Human beings and other beings lived in those lower worlds, and through various crises — usually caused by human moral failure — were guided upward through a series of worlds to emerge into the present one.

The Navajo — Holy People and the Four Worlds

In the Navajo creation story, before the present world there were four previous ones. The first world was black and small — the people there were insect-like beings. The second world was blue — birds lived there. The third world was yellow — the people began to take more human form. The fourth world was white and glittering — where the Holy People (supernatural beings) shaped the landscape and created the beings of the present world.

The Holy People — Changing Woman, First Man, First Woman, the Hero Twins Monster Slayer and Born for Water — are the central figures of Navajo spiritual life. They are not gods in the distant Western sense but interactive spiritual beings who continue to be involved in human life, who can be

called upon through ceremony, and whose stories are retold in healing ceremonies that can last nine days.

Changing Woman (Asdzaa Nadleehe) is the most beloved figure in Navajo spirituality — a being who embodies the cycles of nature, aging from young woman to old woman and back again with the seasons, never actually dying. She created the four original Navajo clans from her own skin rubbed from different parts of her body. She is associated with the Earth, with corn, with the seasons, and with the principle that change is not loss but transformation.

The Navajo concept of Hózhó — usually translated as 'beauty, balance, harmony' — is the organizing principle of Navajo philosophy. It is not a state to be achieved once and maintained. It is a dynamic balance that must be continuously maintained through right living, right relationship, and ceremony. The Navajo Blessing Way ceremony, the Enemy Way ceremony, and the nine-day chantways are all technologies for restoring Hózhó when it has been disrupted by illness, conflict, or spiritual imbalance.

"Walk in beauty before me. Walk in beauty behind me. Walk in beauty below me. Walk in beauty above me. Walk in beauty all around me. In beauty it is finished."

— Navajo Blessing Way — Hózhó Naahasdlíí'

The Hopi — Emergence and the Fourth World

The Hopi people of the Arizona desert tell of emergence through four worlds, each ending when the people forgot the Creator's instructions and fell into conflict, corruption, and imbalance. Each time, those who remained faithful were guided to emerge into the next world. The present world is the Fourth World — the world of Tuwaqachi, 'the complete world.'

Hopi prophecy is extensive and specific. Their elders speak of signs that indicate when the world is nearing its next transition: roads in the sky (interpreted as contrails or flight paths), a gourd full of ashes dropped from the sky (the atomic bomb), the spinning of a new spinning wheel in the sky (satellite technology). The Hopi understanding is not fatalistic — the next great change can be prevented or mitigated if humanity returns to the instructions of the Creator before it is too late.

Central to Hopi spiritual life are the Kachinas (Katsinas) — spirit beings who serve as intermediaries between the Creator and human beings. There are hundreds of named Kachinas, each with specific functions: rain-bringing, healing, agricultural abundance, child protection. For half the year, from winter solstice to summer solstice, the Kachinas are understood to physically reside with the Hopi people. During this period, masked dancers embody the Kachinas in ceremony, and Kachina dolls are given to children not as toys but as sacred teaching objects. The kiva — a semi-underground ceremonial chamber entered by a ladder through a hole in the roof — is the physical threshold between the human world and the world of the Kachinas.

The Cherokee — Earth Diver and the Sacred Fire

The Cherokee tell of a time when all beings lived in the sky world, crowded and uncomfortable. A water beetle dove into the primordial waters below and brought up mud from the bottom. The mud spread into an island, and a great buzzard flew over it drying the earth with his wings. Where his wings dipped low and hit the earth, valleys formed. Where they rose, mountains formed. This is why the southern Appalachians — the Cherokee homeland — have such dramatic terrain.

The Cherokee understand the world as organized into three levels: the Upper World of perfect order and the past, This World where humans live in an imperfect balance between extremes, and the Under World of chaos and the future. The boundaries between these worlds are permeable — rivers and caves are passageways between them. The cardinal animals associated with each direction serve as spiritual guardians.

Central to Cherokee spiritual life is the Sacred Fire — a fire understood as the living presence of the Creator, maintained continuously in each community. All other fires in the community were lit from the Sacred Fire. When the Cherokee were forcibly removed to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears in 1838-1839, some carried embers of the Sacred Fire with them — the most important thing to preserve, the living thread of connection between the people and their homeland.

Trickster and Creator — Coyote, Raven, and Nanabozho

A figure that appears across an astonishing geographic range is the Trickster — a being who is simultaneously the creator of essential gifts for humanity and the source of chaos, disruption, and unintended consequences. Coyote in the Plains and Southwest traditions. Raven on the Pacific Coast and in the Arctic. Nanabozho (Nanabush, Great Hare) among the Algonquian peoples. Iktomi the Spider among the Lakota.

The Trickster is not evil — not in the Western sense of a fallen angel or a devil. The Trickster is the principle of disruption in the service of creation. Raven, in the Northwest Coast traditions, steals the sun from a box and brings light to the world — not from noble intention but from greed, curiosity, and mischief. The result is nevertheless the most essential gift imaginable. Coyote creates death — not as cruelty but because without death the world would fill up and there would be no room for new life.

The Trickster teaches that wisdom does not only come from noble intentions, that the sacred arrives through unexpected channels, that the universe uses all of its instruments — including chaos, folly, and mischief — to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. The Trickster is the Hermetic Principle of Polarity in its most entertainingly human form.

PART FOUR: THE MEDICINE WHEEL AND THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

The Medicine Wheel — The Universe in a Circle

The Medicine Wheel — also called the Sacred Hoop — is one of the most widely shared symbolic frameworks across Indigenous North American cultures, though its specific form and associations vary significantly from nation to nation. At its most fundamental: a circle (representing the completeness of all creation, the cycle of life, the interconnectedness of all things) divided by two lines meeting at the center (representing the sacred paths, the horizontal axis of the four directions, the vertical axis of sky and earth) into four quadrants.

The Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming — a stone structure approximately 80 feet in diameter with 28 spokes radiating from a central cairn, located at 9,642 feet elevation in the Bighorn Mountains — was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1970. No Indigenous people claim to have built it; the Crow state it was already present when their ancestors arrived in the region. Its astronomical alignments suggest deliberate orientation to the summer solstice sunrise and the rising points of specific stars. It has been in continuous ceremonial use for an unknown length of time.

The Number Four The number four is sacred across many Indigenous North American traditions: four directions, four seasons, four stages of life (childhood, youth, adulthood, elderhood), four dimensions of the human being (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual), four races of humanity, four sacred plants (in many traditions: tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass). In the Lakota tradition there are four ages, and White Buffalo Calf Woman transforms through four colors — black, red, yellow, white — as she departs. The Medicine Wheel has four quadrants. The sweat lodge door is opened four times during ceremony. The vision quest lasts four days. Four is the number of wholeness, of completion, of the sacred in material form.

The Four Directions in Detail

While specific associations vary significantly between nations, the following represents widely shared correspondences in Plains traditions particularly — especially Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and related peoples. These are not universal Indigenous teachings but specific to these nations and regions.

Direction	Colors	Season	Life Stage	Element	Animal	Teaching
East	Yellow/Gold	Spring	Birth/Childhood	Air/Wind	Eagle	New beginnings, illumination, clarity of sight, the light of da

South	Red	Summer	Youth	Fire/Earth	Mouse/Coyote	Growth, trust, warmth, the fullness of summer, heart-centered
West	Black/Blue	Autumn	Adulthood	Water	Bear	Introspection, looking within, the darkness before transform
North	White	Winter	Elderhood	Earth	Buffalo/White Owl	Wisdom, endurance, the long cold, the teachings that only
Center	Green	All Seasons	All Stages	Spirit/Fire	Human Being	The self, the axis, the point where all directions meet, sacre

The East — Eagle and the Dawn

East is where the sun rises — the direction of new beginnings, of illumination, of the clarity that comes with first light. In many traditions the eagle is the guardian of the East — the bird that flies highest, that sees the furthest, that carries prayers to the Creator and brings back the Creator's vision. Eagle feathers are among the most sacred objects in many Plains traditions, earned through ceremony and deed, never casually given or received. The eagle's ability to see from great height while remaining connected to the earth — to hold both the vision and the ground simultaneously — is the quality the East teaches: illumination that serves action, sight that is grounded in relationship.

The East corresponds to childhood and birth — the beginning of the journey, the freshness of the beginner's mind, the quality of innocent perception that sees everything new. In spiritual practice, the East calls us back to that quality of direct perception — before the mind has overlaid everything with concept, judgment, and assumption.

The South — Mouse, Coyote, and Trust

South is the direction of summer, of growth, of the heart. In the Lakota tradition, Mouse is sometimes associated with the South — not because the mouse is powerful but because the mouse is close. Mouse knows the tiniest details of the world at ground level, knows what the eagle cannot see from its great height. The South teaches that trust grows from close relationship, from intimacy with the specific, from paying attention to what is immediately present.

Other traditions associate Coyote or the wolf with the South — the social animals, the beings whose intelligence is relational and playful. The South corresponds to youth and the fullness of summer — the period of greatest vitality, of relationship, of learning through joy and through laughter. The South is the direction of the heart's opening.

The West — Bear and the Inner Journey

West is where the sun sets — the direction of the unknown, of going within, of the darkness that is not the enemy of light but its necessary partner. The bear is the guardian of the West in many traditions — the animal that spends winter in the earth, who enters the darkness of the den and emerges transformed in spring. The bear is the great healer in many Indigenous traditions because healing requires the willingness to enter the darkness of what is wrong rather than remaining in the comfortable light of what is familiar.

The West corresponds to adulthood — the stage of life when the easy certainties of youth give way to the more complex understanding that comes from difficulty, from loss, from the willingness to sit with what is not yet resolved. The West is the direction of the vision quest — the entry into darkness to receive the vision that can only come when we stop filling the darkness with noise and distraction.

The North — Buffalo, White Owl, and Wisdom

North is the direction of winter, of endurance, of the long cold that tests everything. The buffalo is the guardian of the North in the Plains traditions — the great provider, the animal that gave everything to the people and received their complete reverence in return. The white owl is another guardian of the North — the owl that sees in darkness, that turns its head to look in all directions, that carries the wisdom of those who have passed.

The North corresponds to elderhood — the stage of life when wisdom has been earned through the full experience of all the other directions, when what remains after everything unnecessary has been stripped away by the long winds of the North is what is truly essential. The North does not give its teachings easily or quickly. It requires that you endure.

The Center — The Sacred Fire Within

The fifth direction — the center — is the most important of all. It is the point where the four directions meet, where heaven meets earth, where the human being stands as the axis of their own cosmos. The center is where the sacred fire burns — the fire that is both the fire of Wakan Tanka at the center of creation and the fire of the individual soul.

The center is the self — not the ego-self but the true self, the self that is in relationship with all four directions simultaneously, that contains all four seasons within one cycle of breath, that carries within it the eagle's vision and the mouse's closeness and the bear's willingness to enter darkness and the buffalo's enduring strength.

PART FIVE: WHITE BUFFALO CALF WOMAN AND THE SEVEN SACRED RITES

White Buffalo Calf Woman — The Great Teacher of the Lakota

Of all the stories in Indigenous North American tradition that have reached wide audiences outside their origin culture, the story of White Buffalo Calf Woman is among the most powerful and the most consistently told. She is to the Lakota what Christ is to Christians or the Buddha is to Buddhists — not merely a historical teacher but a living presence who continues to be invoked, honored, and awaited.

The Story

A long time ago — the stories say 19 generations — during a time of great hunger, the chief of the Lakota sent two young scouts out to look for buffalo. As they traveled, they saw a strange white cloud in the distance. When they drew closer, they saw it was a young woman, walking toward them in white buckskin, carrying a bundle on her back. She was so beautiful that one of the scouts was filled with lust and told his companion he intended to take her for his wife.

His companion warned him that she appeared to be a sacred woman and that approaching her with impure intentions would be dangerous. The first scout ignored him and went toward her. A cloud enveloped them both. When it cleared, the woman stood alone — and at her feet was the first scout, reduced to bones with snakes crawling among them.

The woman addressed the remaining scout. She told him she was wakan — sacred. She instructed him to return to his camp, tell the chief she was coming, have a great lodge prepared, and await her arrival. She told him that if he did as she instructed, his people would rise again.

The scout did as she said. The lodge was prepared. The next day she arrived, walking in a clockwise direction. She sat in the place of honor in the west. She spoke to the people. She showed them the Sacred Pipe she carried — its bowl of red catlinite stone (representing the Earth, representing the womb), its wooden stem (representing all that grows from the earth). She showed them how to pray with it, how to send their voices to Wakan Tanka through the smoke that rose from it — the visible breath of the Creator.

"With visible breath, I am walking — A voice I am sending as I walk. In a sacred manner I am walking. With visible tracks I am walking. In a sacred manner I walk."

— Song first sung by White Buffalo Calf Woman, still sung today

She gave them seven circles carved on a small round stone — representing the seven sacred rites they would learn to use the pipe. She taught them the first rite directly. The other six, she said, would be revealed to them in time. Then she told them: 'There will be four ages, and I will look in on you once each age. At the end of the four ages, I will return.'

Then she left, walking clockwise. At the top of a hill she stopped, rolled on the earth, and became a black buffalo. She stood, rolled again, and became a red buffalo. A third time, a yellow buffalo. A fourth time, she became a white buffalo — and disappeared into the clouds. Immediately, great herds of buffalo surrounded the camp. The famine was over.

The Four Colors of the Buffalo White Buffalo Calf Woman's transformation through four buffalo colors — black, red, yellow, and white — mirrors the four directions and the four races of humanity in Lakota teaching. The white buffalo is the rarest form — albino buffalo occur approximately once in ten million births. When white buffalo calves are born, they are understood as the sign of White Buffalo Calf Woman's return and attention. In 1994, a female white buffalo calf was born in Janesville, Wisconsin, named Miracle. Thousands of Indigenous people made pilgrimage to see her. She was considered one of the most significant spiritual events in decades. The Sacred Pipe she gave to the Lakota is still in existence — held by Arvol Looking Horse, the 19th-generation Keeper of the Sacred Pipe Bundle.

The Seven Sacred Rites

The Seven Sacred Rites given by White Buffalo Calf Woman are the organizing framework of Lakota spirituality — seven technologies for maintaining the relationship between the people and Wakan Tanka, for healing, for rites of passage, for the proper care of the dead, and for renewing the sacred bonds of community and kinship.

The Sweat Lodge — Inipi

(To live again / to purify)

The most commonly practiced of the seven rites. A dome-shaped lodge of willow saplings is covered with hides or blankets. Heated stones — the grandfathers and grandmothers — are carried in and placed in a central pit. Water poured on them creates steam. The darkness, heat, steam, and communal prayer create an environment of purification. The door is opened four times during the ceremony. When participants emerge, they are understood to have been reborn — the lodge is the womb of Mother Earth, and emergence is rebirth. Inipi was performed before any major undertaking: before battle, before a vision quest, before ceremony, before any significant transition.

Crying for a Vision — Hanbleciya

(Crying for a dream)

The vision quest — a period of solitary fasting and prayer, typically four days, in an isolated place without food or water. The seeker goes to a holy person first, offers the pipe, asks to be held in prayer during the quest. They then go alone to a designated sacred place — often a hilltop — and remain there, praying continually, sleeping little, watching for the vision that the Creator will send. Whatever comes — animal, spirit being, dream, simply the experience of the wind or the stars — is received as sacred communication. On return, the vision is discussed with the holy person for interpretation.

The Sun Dance — Wiwanke Wachipi

(Gazing at the sun / looking at the sun while dancing)

Considered the most important of the seven rites — not only to the Lakota but to many other Plains nations. Held once a year, typically in late June or July, it is a ceremony of collective renewal, self-sacrifice for the community, and the renewal of the relationship between the people and the Creator. Dancers fast and dance for four days, their gaze fixed on the Sun. In the traditional form, some dancers pierce their chests or backs with sticks attached to the central Sun Dance tree — a voluntary sacrifice of their own flesh as an offering for the healing of their people. The Sun Dance was outlawed by the US government in 1883 and was illegal until 1978. It is now practiced openly and is one of the most powerful surviving ceremonies on Turtle Island.

Keeping of the Soul — Wanagi Wicagluha

(Keeping the spirit)

When a person dies, a lock of their hair is kept in a sacred bundle. The family maintains a special place for the soul to dwell — feeding it daily, living in a heightened state of spiritual care. After a year of mourning, a feast is held, gifts are given to the community (particularly to those who helped the grieving family), and the soul is formally released to travel the Spirit Path — the Milky Way — to Wakan Tanka. The belief is that keeping the soul for a year purifies it and strengthens the community's love for one another.

Making of Relatives — Hunkapi

(Becoming related / making of relatives)

A ceremony through which two people who are not blood relatives are formally adopted into kinship with each other. In traditional Lakota society, kinship was the organizing principle of all social life — your responsibilities and your rights were determined by your relationships. Hunkapi extended these bonds beyond blood, creating a web of sacred obligation that held the community together across family lines. In times of conflict, Hunkapi could end disputes by making former enemies relatives.

Coming of Age for Women — Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan

(Her alone they sing over)

The ceremony honoring a young woman's first menstruation — her transition from girlhood to womanhood. In the Lakota tradition, this is a time of great celebration, not shame. The young woman is

honored by the community, instructed by elder women in the responsibilities and gifts of womanhood, and formally acknowledged as having entered her power. White Buffalo Calf Woman herself is invoked during this ceremony — she embodies the ideal of Lakota womanhood, and the ceremony connects the young woman to that lineage of sacred feminine power.

Throwing of the Ball — Tapa Wankaye Yap

(Throwing of the ball)

The least commonly practiced of the seven rites in contemporary times. A young girl stands at the center and throws a ball to the four directions. Those who catch it are blessed. The ball represents Wakan Tanka — the Creator who can be found in all directions, who is accessible to all, and whose blessings are distributed to whoever is ready to receive them. The ceremony teaches that the sacred is available to all and that it falls on us by both chance and by our readiness to receive.

PART SIX: VISION QUEST AND SHAMANISM

The Vision Quest — Crying for a Dream

The vision quest is one of the most widely practiced and widely misunderstood of Indigenous ceremonial practices. In its authentic forms across many nations — not just the Lakota — it is a formal ceremony preceded by extensive preparation, conducted under the guidance of a holy person, and followed by a structured process of interpretation and integration. It is not a casual camping trip or a romantic adventure in solitude. It is a deliberate, supervised encounter with the invisible world, undertaken in service of one's community, not merely oneself.

The vision quest in its many forms across many nations shares a common structure: isolation, fasting, prayer, and the willingness to receive whatever the Creator sends. The seeker does not control what vision comes. They do not go seeking a specific animal or a specific message. They go to be empty enough to receive whatever is given. This receptive orientation — the opposite of the Western spiritual consumer who shops for the experience they prefer — is essential to the vision quest's integrity.

"The vision quest can last up to four days and nights. The person undertaking the spirit quest begins by taking the pipe to a holy man and asking him to guide and pray for him. After this, the person goes to an isolated place without food or water, praying to be shown a vision and to communicate with the spirits for guidance and knowledge."

— *Borderlands Project, Seven Sacred Rites*

The vision that comes — whether dramatic or subtle — is understood as a gift from the Creator and from the specific spiritual helpers of the seeker's lineage and nation. It is not analyzed by the seeker alone but taken back to the holy person who held them in prayer, who has the training and the relationship with the spirit world necessary to help interpret what was received.

A Note on Respect and Attribution The commercialization of the vision quest in Western 'new age' and 'wellness' culture is one of the most consistently cited examples of spiritual appropriation by Indigenous leaders. Workshop-based 'vision quests' charging thousands of dollars, conducted by non-Indigenous facilitators without proper training or ceremonial authority, are specifically disrespectful not only because they appropriate a sacred practice but because they do so without the protective ceremonial container that makes the genuine practice safe. The vision quest puts a person in direct contact with very powerful spiritual forces. Without the proper ceremonial preparation and the holding of a trained holy person, this contact can be destabilizing. Indigenous elders have consistently said: if you want to do a vision quest, find a traditional teacher from the specific nation whose tradition you wish to engage with and ask for guidance properly.

The Medicine Person — Healer of Body, Soul, and Community

The term shaman comes from the Tungus people of Siberia — it is not an Indigenous North American word. Its widespread application to Indigenous North American healers is a simplification that flattens enormous diversity. Different nations have different terms: medicine person, holy person, healer, ceremonial leader, dream keeper, singer, herbalist. Some of these roles overlap; some are distinct.

What these roles share is the capacity to act as an intermediary between the human community and the spirit world — to diagnose the spiritual causes of illness, to conduct the ceremonies that restore balance, to interpret dreams and visions, and to maintain the community's relationship with its ancestors and with the land.

The Calling — Illness as Initiation

In many Indigenous traditions, the medicine person's path begins not with a choice but with an illness — often a severe, mysterious illness that conventional treatments cannot explain or cure, that takes the person to the edge of death and forces an encounter with the spirit world. The illness is understood as the spirits demanding that the person accept their calling.

This pattern — what Mircea Eliade (in *Shamanism*, 1951) called 'the shaman's illness' — appears across Siberian, Mongolian, Mesoamerican, and many Indigenous North American traditions. The healer is always the wounded healer, the one who has been to the place of death and returned with knowledge. It is the same pattern that Haligricity recognizes in the Haligric path: the greatest teachers have usually been the greatest sufferers, not because suffering is valuable in itself but because it breaks open the places where we were closed.

The Medicine Bundle

One of the most sacred objects in many North American Indigenous traditions is the medicine bundle — a wrapped collection of sacred objects that together constitute a concentrated field of spiritual power specific to the holder and their relationships with particular spirit beings. A medicine bundle might contain: feathers from specific birds, stones of particular shapes or colors, dried plants, animal bones, small carved figures, and other objects received in vision or ceremony.

The bundle is not a collection of lucky charms. Each object in it represents a specific relationship with a specific spiritual ally. Together they form what we might call a portable altar — a concentration of the practitioner's entire web of spiritual relationships in a form that can be carried, protected, and activated through ceremony.

Quartz crystals, polished gemstones, and eagle feathers were specifically among the objects cited in historical accounts of Algonquian medicine bundles. The understanding that certain objects concentrate and conduct spiritual power is the same recognition that underlies Haligricity's work with stones and crystals — and its origin in Indigenous traditions predates the contemporary crystal healing movement by thousands of years.

Sacred Plants and the Green Nation

In most Indigenous North American traditions, plants are understood as a nation — the Standing People — with their own intelligence, their own relationship to the Creator, and their own teachings to offer those who approach them with proper respect. The medicine person's relationship with healing plants is not merely pharmacological. It is relational — built through years of respectful attention, of learning to receive what the plant teaches, of asking permission before harvesting and giving thanks after.

Four plants are sacred across many traditions: tobacco (for prayer and offering), sage (for purification), cedar (for protection and healing), and sweetgrass (for attracting good spirits). Each is used differently in different nations — but their recognition as sacred plants appears across an enormous range from the Lakota of the Plains to the Ojibwe of the Great Lakes to the nations of the Pacific Northwest.

Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum* and related species)

The primary plant of prayer and offering across many North American traditions. Offered to the four directions before ceremony, to the earth before harvesting medicines, to elders and spiritual beings when seeking their help. The tobacco given to the Creator is not the commercial cigarette but traditional tobacco grown with ceremony and used with intention. The smoke carries prayers upward — it is the visible breath of the prayer.

Sage (*Artemisia tridentata* and related species)

Used for purification — burning sage (smudging) to clear a space of negative energy before ceremony, to clear the body and energy field of accumulated negative influences. The smoke of sage is understood to dissolve what is not welcome and prepare the space for the sacred. Sage also lines the sweat lodge floor as a sacred bed for ceremony participants.

Cedar (*Thuja species and related*)

A plant of protection and healing. Cedar boughs are used in many purification ceremonies, cedar water is used for healing, cedar smoke protects against malevolent influences. In Northwest Coast traditions, cedar is the tree of life — the canoes, the longhouses, the baskets, the clothing were all cedar.

Sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*)

Braided and burned to attract good spirits and positive influences. Where sage clears what is unwanted, sweetgrass invites what is welcome. The braid of sweetgrass represents the hair of Mother Earth — using it is an act of reverence for her, and its sweet smell is her breath rising in the smoke.

PART SEVEN: SACRED ANIMALS AND TOTEM BEINGS

The Animal Nations — Teachers and Relatives

In Indigenous North American cosmologies, animals are not lesser beings below humans on a hierarchy of creation. They are elder beings — the animal nations, who arrived in the world before humans and have been here longer. They are therefore teachers, not subjects. They know things about living on this earth that humans are still learning. A wolf's understanding of community and loyalty, an eagle's understanding of perspective and vision, a bear's understanding of the healing power of darkness and rest — these are genuine forms of knowledge that the human being accesses by entering into relationship with the animal.

The concept of the totem — from the Ojibwe word doodem, meaning 'kinship group' — originally referred not to an individual's 'spirit animal' but to the clan system of the Ojibwe: each clan associated with a specific animal whose qualities shaped the clan's role in the community. The Crane Clan were the orators and diplomats. The Bear Clan were the healers and protectors. The Fish Clan were the scholars and mediators. The totem animal was a community identity, not a personal one.

The Buffalo — Tatanka	
Region	Lakota and most Plains nations
Population today	
Known for	The buffalo gave everything to the people of the Plains — food, shelter, clothing, tools, ceremony. Every part of the animal was used; none was wasted. The relationship between the Lakota and the buffalo was not predator and prey but a sacred covenant of mutual sustenance. The buffalo came to be hunted because it offered itself — and the people honored that offering by using every part and wasting nothing. The near-extinction of the buffalo in the 1870s-1880s — from 30-60 million animals to fewer than 1,000 — was understood by the Plains peoples not merely as an ecological disaster but as a spiritual catastrophe: the covenant had been broken, the relative had been dishonored. The Lakota phrase 'the buffalo is our relative' is a literal statement about the nature of the relationship, not a metaphor.

The Eagle — Wanbli Gleska

Region Across many nations

Population today

Known for Eagles fly higher than any other bird and see farther — making them the natural messengers between the human world and the Creator. Eagle feathers are among the most sacred objects in many traditions, used in ceremony, worn by those who have earned the honor, and given as the highest acknowledgment of achievement or sacrifice. In the United States, possession of eagle feathers by non-Native people is illegal under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act — one of the few legal protections for Indigenous sacred objects. The eagle teaches: seek the highest perspective without losing your connection to the earth. Hold the vision and the ground simultaneously.

The Bear — Mato

Region Across many nations, especially eastern and Great Plains

Population today

Known for The bear is the great healer. When bears emerge from hibernation, they seek out specific plants to restore their health after months without food — and Indigenous peoples have observed and learned from this behavior for millennia. The bear is the original herbalist. In many traditions, the bear is associated with the West — with going within, with the courage to enter the darkness of one's own shadow and emerge transformed. Bear medicine is specifically called upon for healing work because the bear knows how to make itself well.

The Wolf — Sunkmanitu Tanka

Region Lakota and many others

Population today

Known for The wolf is the teacher of community, of loyalty, of the balance between individual strength and collective identity. Wolf packs are complex social structures based on cooperation, on the care of the injured and old, on the protection of the young. The wolf hunts in community and shares the kill. Wolf medicine teaches: you are not meant to make it alone. Your strength is multiplied by your relationships, not diminished by them.

The Turtle — Land and Patience

Region Iroquois/Haudenosaunee and others

Population today

Known for As the carrier of Turtle Island in the Sky Woman story, the turtle carries the world on its back — the teaching of patient strength, of bearing great weight without complaint, of carrying the community without requiring recognition. The turtle's shell has thirteen sections — corresponding to the thirteen moons of the lunar year. The turtle is the original calendar keeper. It is also one of the oldest beings on earth, surviving multiple mass extinctions through patience, adaptability, and the protection of its shell.

The Coyote and Raven — The Trickster Teachers

Region Across many nations

Population today

Known for As discussed in the creation section, the Trickster — whether Coyote in the Southwest and Plains, Raven on the Pacific Coast, or Nanabozho among the Algonquian peoples — is the most morally complex of the sacred animals. The Trickster brings fire, light, and essential knowledge to humanity — but never through noble intention, always through mischief, greed, curiosity, or accident. The teaching: wisdom and gifts arrive through the full range of human experience, not only through virtue. The universe uses every instrument, including the humble, the foolish, and the unexpected.

PART EIGHT: THE AFTERLIFE ACROSS NATIONS

Death and the Spirit World

Native American traditions hold an enormous diversity of understandings about what happens after death — far more diverse than the single-heaven, single-hell binary of much Western religion. What is nearly universal is this: the spirit continues. Death is a transition, not an ending. The invisible world is as populated and as real as the visible one, and those who have died remain in relationship with those who are living.

The Spirit Path — The Milky Way

For the Lakota, those who die travel the Spirit Path — the Milky Way — to reach their destination with Wakan Tanka. Before they can travel fully, however, an old woman sits at the fork in the path and examines the tattoos on their wrists. If the marks are those of a person who has lived well and fulfilled their ceremonial obligations, she allows them to pass. If not, she pushes them off the path, and they become wandering ghosts.

"According to the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman, when a Lakota person dies, their souls must be purified so they can reunite with Wakan Tanka. The soul travels along the Spirit Path — the Milky Way — to reach Maka Owichapahe — the old woman who judges each soul."

— *Seven Lakota Rites, St. Joseph's Indian School documentation*

The Aurora Borealis — Ancestors Dancing

Among the Inuit and many northern nations, the aurora borealis (the northern lights) is understood as the spirits of the ancestors dancing in the sky. The shimmering, moving curtains of colored light are not a natural phenomenon to be explained by physics alone — they are the visible presence of those who have passed, remaining visible to those below, dancing in the joy of their continued existence.

This is not metaphor. When an Inuit elder looks at the northern lights and feels the presence of their grandmother, they are not engaging in sentimental fantasy. They are participating in a living cosmology in which the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds is permeable, in which the dead are never fully absent, and in which the sky is not empty but full of relations.

Stars as Ancestors

Across many traditions, the stars are understood as ancestors — as the souls of those who have lived and passed, continuing their existence in the sky world. The Pleiades appear in the sacred narratives of Indigenous peoples from the Americas to Australia to Africa — always as a group of beings (usually women or sisters) who have become stars. The Lakota call the Pleiades the Seven Brothers. The Blackfoot understand specific stars as specific ancestral beings whose stories are encoded in the star patterns.

The profound astronomical knowledge of Indigenous peoples — demonstrated in the alignment of ceremonial sites to solstices and equinoxes, in the tracking of Venus cycles, in the use of stars for navigation — was not merely practical. It was relational. To know the stars was to know your ancestors. To track their movements was to stay in relationship with those who had come before and who continued to guide from above.

The Ghost Dance — A Prayer for Return

In 1889, a Paiute holy man named Wovoka received a vision during a solar eclipse. In his vision, he saw the Creator, who told him that if the people performed a specific dance and lived in peace and harmony, the earth would be renewed, the buffalo would return, and the ancestors would come back to life, joining the living in a world restored to its pre-contact abundance and wholeness.

The Ghost Dance spread rapidly through the Plains nations with extraordinary speed — a people in crisis reaching for the most powerful hope available. The United States government, seeing large numbers of Indigenous people gathering for ceremony, interpreted it as preparation for war. On December 29, 1890, the 7th Cavalry surrounded a Lakota camp at Wounded Knee Creek and opened fire. Approximately 300 Lakota men, women, and children were massacred.

The Ghost Dance did not die at Wounded Knee. The hope it expressed — for the return of what has been taken, for reunion with the ancestors, for the restoration of a world that honors all life — is the same hope that animates Indigenous cultural survival to this day.

PART NINE: THE LAND, RECIPROCITY, AND SACRED ECOLOGY

We Belong to the Land

"We are the land. That is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life. The Earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the Earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies."

— Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo poet and scholar

The most fundamental philosophical difference between Indigenous North American worldviews and the dominant Western worldview is not about gods or ceremonies or symbols. It is about land. In the Western tradition — rooted in Roman property law, in Genesis 1:28 ('have dominion over the fish of the sea'), in the Enlightenment conception of nature as resource — land is property. It can be owned, bought, sold, extracted, and discarded.

In Indigenous North American traditions, land cannot be owned because land is a relative. You do not own your grandmother. You are in relationship with her. You receive her gifts with gratitude. You care for her in return. You do not divide her up and sell pieces of her to strangers. The concept of individual ownership of land was literally incomprehensible to most Indigenous peoples at first contact — not because they were simple but because their legal and philosophical framework was organized around an entirely different understanding of what land is and what relationship to it means.

"The old people came literally to love the soil. They sat on the ground with an awareness of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the earth, and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing."

— Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota Chief

Reciprocity as Spiritual Law

The organizing ethical principle of most Indigenous North American traditions is reciprocity — the understanding that every taking requires a giving in return, that the relationship between humans and the natural world is a relationship of mutual obligation and mutual gift.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi botanist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 2013) describes the Potawatomi concept of reciprocity in practice: before harvesting any plant, you ask its permission. If the

plant says yes (you know because the harvest feels right), you take only what you need. You leave enough for the plant to continue, for the other beings who also depend on it, and for the next generation. After harvesting, you give back — a pinch of tobacco, a song, a prayer, some water. The relationship is maintained through the ongoing exchange of gifts.

This is not primitive mysticism. It is sophisticated ecological knowledge encoded in a philosophical and spiritual framework that makes sustainable relationship with the natural world not merely advisable but spiritually required. The United Nations estimates that Indigenous peoples comprise less than 5% of the world's population yet protect 80% of global biodiversity — because their traditional ecological knowledge encodes the practices that maintain the health of the systems they live within.

Sacred Sites and the Living Landscape

For Indigenous peoples, the land is not a neutral backdrop. Every mountain, every river, every specific rock outcropping is storied — has its own relationship to the community, its own presence, its own history in the oral tradition. The Black Hills (Paha Sapa) are sacred to the Lakota not merely as beautiful nature but as the heart of everything that is — the place where the sacred is most concentrated, most accessible, most alive. The Colorado River is sacred to the Navajo, Hopi, and Havasupai not merely as a water source but as a living being whose health is inseparable from their spiritual health.

When sacred sites are desecrated — by mining, by pipeline construction, by tourist development — Indigenous peoples are not merely losing culturally significant locations. They are losing the locations where their living relationship with the spirit world can be most effectively maintained. It is the equivalent of destroying every church, mosque, and temple in a religious community — but worse, because the sacred sites were not built by human hands but are understood as the Creator's own presence.

Suppression and Survival — The Longest Resistance

The spiritual traditions described in this document were not simply practiced in a pre-contact past and then allowed to fade. They were actively, deliberately, and systematically suppressed by the United States and Canadian governments through a series of policies that continued well into the 20th century.

- The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 — funded missionary efforts to replace Indigenous spiritual practices with Christianity
- The Indian Boarding School System (1870s-1970s) — children were forcibly removed from their communities, forbidden to speak their languages, punished for practicing their spiritual traditions. Thousands died in these schools. Approximately 50 mass grave sites have been identified in Canada since 2021.
- The Indian Religious Crimes Code of 1883 — explicitly outlawed the Sun Dance, the Vision Quest, the sweat lodge, and other ceremonies. Violation was punishable by imprisonment.
- The Dance Order of 1921 (Canada) — prohibited Indigenous dances and potlatches
- The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 — ended some of the worst policies but required tribes to adopt Western-style governments that displaced traditional governance
- The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 — the first legal protection for Indigenous religious practices in the United States. The ceremonies in this document were illegal in the United States until 1978.

Despite a century of deliberate suppression, these traditions survived. They survived in secret ceremonies conducted at risk. They survived in the memory of elders who transmitted what they could under impossible conditions. They survived in the oral traditions that proved more durable than the institutions that tried to destroy them. They survive today in living communities that practice them openly and that are engaged in the ongoing work of revitalization, of teaching the next generation, of healing what was broken.

Language as Ceremony

For most Indigenous traditions, language is not merely a communication tool but a carrier of the entire cosmological, spiritual, and ethical worldview encoded within the tradition. The words for sacred things,

for relationships, for ceremonies carry meanings that cannot be fully translated into English because English does not have the concepts those words describe.

When a language dies, it does not simply become inconvenient — the entire spiritual and philosophical world encoded in that language becomes inaccessible. Of the approximately 300 Indigenous languages spoken in North America at the time of European contact, about 175 are still spoken today, most of them by small numbers of elders. The revitalization of Indigenous languages is therefore not merely a cultural project but a spiritual one — it is the recovery of the specific words through which the relationship with the Creator, the land, and the ancestors can be most fully expressed.

Recommended Reading — Indigenous Authors First

The most important principle in learning about Indigenous traditions is to prioritize the voices of Indigenous people themselves. The following books are by Indigenous authors:

- *Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants. Milkweed Editions, 2013. (Potawatomi) — Perhaps the most widely read contemporary book on Indigenous ecological philosophy. Essential.*
- *Black Elk. Black Elk Speaks. Recorded by John G. Neihardt. University of Nebraska Press, 1932. (Oglala Lakota) — The foundational account of Lakota spirituality as lived experience.*
- *Brown, Joseph Epes (recorder). The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux. University of Oklahoma Press, 1953. (Recorded from Black Elk) — The primary source for the Seven Sacred Rites.*
- *Deloria Jr., Vine. God Is Red: A Native View of Religion. Fulcrum Publishing, 1973/2003. (Standing Rock Sioux) — The most rigorous comparison of Indigenous and Western religious worldviews.*
- *Allen, Paula Gunn. The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions. Beacon Press, 1986. (Laguna Pueblo) — Essential for understanding Indigenous feminism and the sacred feminine in Native traditions.*
- *Harjo, Joy. Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings. W.W. Norton, 2015. (Muscogee Creek) — Poetry that carries Indigenous cosmology into contemporary form.*
- *Erdrich, Louise. Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country. Harper Perennial, 2003. (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) — A personal exploration of Ojibwe landscape and spirituality.*
- *LaDuke, Winona. All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life. South End Press, 1999. (Anishinaabe/Ojibwe) — Sacred ecology in action.*
- *Swann, Brian (ed.). Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America. Random House, 1994. — Anthology of oral literature from many nations.*
- *Treuer, David. The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present. Riverhead Books, 2019. (Ojibwe) — The most comprehensive contemporary history of Native America from an Indigenous perspective.*

Mitakuye Oyasin
All My Relations.

To the four-legged, the winged ones, the Standing People, the Stone People, and all those who came before us.

*All My Relations — Native American Beliefs, Traditions, and Wisdom Compiled for Hali Sarah Parsons • Haligrlicity
Personal Reading Series • May 2026*